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Abolish the Office of the Secretary of Defense?

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates addresses
U.S. Special Operations Command staff

By JOHN T. KUEHN

DOD (Cherie A. Thurlby)

The political and defense communities of 2006 had the wrong debate about former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.¹

Instead of “should he stay or should he go,” the debate should have been whether we even need the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).

It is perhaps time to admit that the great post–World War II American experiment called “unification” has failed.² The recent civil-military relations spat over the handling of the Department of Defense (DOD) by its former chief is merely the occasion for this essay. The conflict was not as much about Rumsfeld’s personality as some would have us believe. The criticism that Rumsfeld received in 2006 and prior has precedence in the tenures of Secretaries past, including James Forrestal, Louis Johnson, Robert McNamara, and a host of others whom many have forgotten.³ It would seem that when problems continually reoccur, we need to look at their cause systemically instead of indulging in the scapegoating common to American culture.

The problem is deeper than any political appointee; the source is the office itself. Simply put, the Secretary of Defense and his supporting staff are too powerful. The wisdom of the

creation and relevance of the original organization are what need to be reconsidered.

Unification

The unification of the Departments of the Navy and War (now renamed the Department of the Army) with the new Department of the Air Force as subordinate organizations under a new Secretary of Defense occurred as a result of the lessons learned from World War II. Unification did not occur naturally or without conflict. The Navy, in fact, was its greatest opponent. Unification had initially been attempted after World War I, principally due to the efforts of advocates such as General William “Billy” Mitchell for an independent air force.⁴ The clamor became so serious that President Calvin Coolidge convened a board in September 1925 to examine a number of questions, the fifth of which was, “Should there be a Department of National Defense under which should be grouped all the military defensive organizations of the Government?” The board included nine civilian and retired military members, including Rear Admiral Frank Friday Fletcher (uncle of the famous Jack Fletcher) and Congressman Carl Vinson. They elected Dwight W. Morrow (a banker and lawyer) as their chairman. The Morrow Board concluded its hearings in November of that year and did “not recommend a Department of National Defense, either as comprising the

Army and the Navy or as comprising three coordinate Departments of Army, Navy, and Air. The disadvantages outweigh the advantages.”⁵ These wise words seem to have special clarity in 2007.

Nevertheless, unification was legislatively implemented by the National Security Act of 1947. This act was significantly modified by the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 and again in 1986 with the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act. Two reorganizations, and our national security structure is still in a muddle. Perhaps it is time for a real “transformation.”

Overview

Having a Secretary of Defense was worth a try, but the imperatives for its retention are outweighed by history, logic, and the Constitution. First, consider the history of the pre-DOD structure. Prior to and during World War II, national defense functions resided in the Departments of the Navy and War. Both departments used boards to provide military advice to their Secretaries. Both Service Secretaries had direct and powerful membership in the Cabinet as strategic civilian leaders. Additionally, they used a “Joint Board” for coordination. The Joint Board function has since moved to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). However, it was this pre-1947 organizational and political architecture that established the foundation

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for victory in World War II. During that war, this defense/strategic structure functioned well with the emergence of the JCS as the unique organizational innovation. However, the emergence of the JCS did not mandate a Secretary of Defense. An understandable but ultimately misplaced desire for more efficiency led to the security act that created OSD.⁶ In addition to the Air Force, powerful new organizations emerged that came under the Secretary of Defense's control and influence—for example, the National Security Agency and an array of Defense agencies, such as the Defense Logistics Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency.

Since its inception, OSD has been shrouded in controversy. Its first occupant was former Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, who was initially opposed to unification. Forrestal, while still on the job, had a nervous breakdown and later committed suicide. The second Secretary, Louis Johnson, also proved problematic. In 1949, during the fight over whether the Navy would have a role in nuclear deterrence, Johnson's highhanded anti-Navy stance prompted the so-called Revolt of the Admirals. The Chief of Naval Operations and Navy Secretary both lost their jobs for honestly expressing their dissent with the Secretary of Defense.⁷ However, Johnson's continued problems, especially the state of the military at the outbreak of the Korean War, prompted President Harry Truman to fire him. Some even questioned Johnson's mental capacities.⁸

There was some stability in the 1950s because a former five-star general was President, and Dwight Eisenhower could overrule and overawe his civilian Secretaries. Ike's famous "military-industrial complex" warning was an intimation that the centralization of power within DOD was problematic. However, his hint went unnoticed. And then came the

McNamara years—proof if ever there was of the danger posed by this office and its capability to abuse power and subvert strategy. Robert McNamara claimed to speak for the consensus of the Joint Chiefs while in fact often ignoring their advice and simply giving his own views.⁹

The Players, the Problems

Name one Secretary of Defense who was great. Having trouble? George Marshall does not count since he earned his stature—and Nobel Prize—as Secretary of State. His later stint at Defense was not so memorable. Maybe the recently departed Caspar Weinberger comes to mind, but even his tenure was somewhat problematic (Lebanon and Grenada), and his style of management is remembered most fondly because he sometimes (wisely) delegated some of his authority to the JCS (like General John Vessey) and Service Secretaries (like John Lehman). Then there was former Congressman Dick Cheney under the first President Bush, who also deferred to the influential General Colin Powell, as well as to his combat-experienced Commander in Chief (George H.W. Bush was a World War II naval aviator), providing more reason to retain the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and at least

two reorganizations, and our national security structure is still in a muddle

consider eliminating OSD. Also, Cheney's boss from 1989 to 1993 was well versed in national security and could easily have served as his own Secretary of Defense. President Bill Clinton's Secretaries? There was the unfortunate Les Aspin. Recently, of course, Donald Rumsfeld's tenure highlighted all of the potential for the

good, bad, and ugly that is inherent in the office. Does the good outweigh all the rest, as the Morrow Board correctly asked? I suggest it does not. It is a *systemic* problem.

There are myriad reasons why the Defense Department and its associated secretarial position are problematic. Many of these reasons were posed and brushed aside during the initial battles over unification, the 1947 National Security Act, and in crafting defense reorganization legislation. Simply put, the office has too broad a span of control, limits or distorts the strategic advice available to the Commander in Chief, and has proved an unending source of conflict inside of the executive branch and out.

McNamara's, and potentially Rumsfeld's (the court of history is still out on this one), tenure particularly highlights how critical it is that our top civilian leader—the President—receives as broad a variety of strategic advice as possible. The existence of OSD places too many obstacles between the President and his Active duty military advisors. Normally, the CJCS is supposed to provide direct military advice through the National Security Council, but in effect the Chairman is chosen by the Secretary of Defense precisely for his willingness to support his immediate chain of command, which is the Secretary of Defense himself. This is not a good system for getting an independent strategic assessment to the Commander in Chief—either through a Service Secretary or through the JCS. Instead of four opinions, the President gets one, which can silence or muddle those below it. The temptation to marginalize other opinions has, in fact, proven too great, as this brief review of OSD suggests.

There have been great efforts to enhance this nation's security structure since 9/11. The opportunity to meaningfully adjust our defense and security structure at the top is already

Left to right: Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara meets with Navy Secretary Paul H. Nitze and Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus R. Vance; President Lyndon Johnson meets with Robert Komer at White House; Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger with GEN John Vessey, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Kim of Republic of Korea



U.S. Navy (Harold Wise)



White House (Yoichi R. Okamoto)



DOD (Robert Ward)



President, Vice President, and former Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld depart farewell ceremony for Secretary Rumsfeld



President and Secretary of Defense with ADM Mike Mullen, USN, and Gen James E. Cartwright, USMC, nominees for Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

in place with new but arguably ineffective bureaucracies for intelligence and homeland security. These “new” organizations would have much more capability and potential for good effect without a competing Office of the Secretary of Defense. Henry David Thoreau said, “The government is best that governs least.” Our security structure prior to World War II provided powerful evidence to support his assertion. What is the objection to having more of a “checks and balances” type system in the strategic and defense councils at the top of our government? The concern is that decision “gridlock”—due to the absence of an all-powerful OSD—might prevent the types of actions that would preempt severe threats to our nation. This was not the case after December 7, 1941. The structure then acted as decisively as our own did after 9/11—perhaps more so. Besides, how much real damage would the elimination of a Secretary of Defense do to the executive branch’s ability to detect, deter, and take decisive action against imminent threats? Relatively little, one suspects.

Moreover, when is the elimination of an extra layer of bureaucratic management a bad thing? To listen to the “transformationalists” of today, “flat hierarchies” are better. Would not elimination of OSD and the Secretary of Defense automatically flatten our strategic and defense hierarchies? Finally, where does the Constitution mandate this office? True, the Commander in Chief has the prerogative to delegate his executive functions, but the language of the Constitution is clear that there is to be only one Commander in Chief. OSD and the Secretary of Defense are not constitutionally protected in any sense.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered for consideration. First, abolish the

Office of the Secretary of Defense with new Defense reform legislation. Next, move the civilian Secretaries of the Navy and Marine Corps, Air Force, and Army back into the Cabinet on a full-time basis, just as Navy and War were prior to and during World War II. Third, retain the JCS organization and staff, but enhance the Chairman’s statutory membership role on the National Security Council (not the Cabinet). Civil-military watchdogs may howl, but as an appointed position, this officer can always be sent packing in the same manner that Truman sent General Douglas MacArthur packing during the Korean War. Additional staff and operations functions at the OSD level can be moved under the Joint Staff. Agencies could be renamed; for example, the Defense Intelligence Agency could be rechristened the Joint Intelligence Agency. The National Defense University could become the Joint Defense University or simply the Defense University to account for the inter-agency realities of today. Letterheads would have to change, but these organizations could be retained almost completely as they are organized now. Certainly some OSD functions that are essential to the security of the country, given existing interagency relationships, will have to be carefully looked at and some even retained. However, we do not need a perfect plan to move ahead on this debate.

It is time to enact another Defense reorganization act. We repealed Prohibition, so why can we not abolish the Office of the Secretary of Defense? **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Donald H. Rumsfeld was a lightning rod for criticism. This reference is to the so-called Revolt of the Generals—including Anthony C. Zinni, Gregory S. Newbold, John M. Riggs, John

Batiste, Paul D. Eaton, and Charles H. Swannack, Jr.—which captured news headlines and editorial pages beginning in April 2006. For representative editorials, see Andrew J. Bacevich, “Generals versus Rumsfeld,” *The Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 2006; and Melvin R. Laird and Robert E. Pursley, “Why Are They Speaking Up Now?” *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2006, 17.

² George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 308–313. Baer provides an illuminating discussion of this topic vis-à-vis the Navy.

³ See John M. Riggs and George R. Worthington, “Crossing Swords: ‘The Generals’ Revolt,’” *Proceedings* (June 2006), 14 and passim.

⁴ William D. O’Neil, “Transformation: Billy Mitchell Style,” *Proceedings* (March 2002), 101.

⁵ National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 80, General Board studies, GB449 series, 1925, Morrow Board report inclusive with these papers.

⁶ See <www.defenselink.mil/specials/secdef_histories/bios/johnson.htm>. Johnson stated the lesson learned in this way: “To the limit the present law allows, I promise you there will be unification as rapidly as the efficiency of the service permits it.”

⁷ Baer, 309.

⁸ Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: Norton, 1969), 374. See also Steven L. Rearden, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense* (Washington DC: Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1984), 127–128. Most famously, Truman’s Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, truly thought that Johnson was “mentally ill.” However, data suggest that Johnson’s outlandish grandstanding could just as well have been due to his training and practice as a trial lawyer in West Virginia or as a bureaucratic infighter in the War Department.

⁹ See H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); and the dated but still useful book by David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), both passim.